

Selected notes on birds of Gola Forest and surroundings, Sierra Leone, including three new species for the country

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Notes sur certaines espèces d'oiseaux de la Forêt de Gola et des environs, Sierra Leone, y compris trois espèces nouvelles pour le pays. La Forêt de Gola forme deux blocs totalisant 750 km² de forêt ombrophile sempervirente et est la plus grande forêt protégée actuellement en Sierra Leone. Son avifaune était connue essentiellement par les travaux de Allport *et al.* (1989). Suite à une enquête faunistique de cinq semaines (22 janvier–28 février 2007), nous présentons des observations concernant *c.*50 des 236 espèces notées, notamment celles non ou rarement rapportées par Allport *et al.*, et des détails originaux sur le comportement et les vocalisations. Trois espèces sont nouvelles ou confirmées pour le pays (Inséparable à collier noir *Agapornis swindernianus*, Coucal à nuque bleue *Centropus monachus* et Martinet de Bates *Apus batesi*); une quatrième (le Souimanga de Bates *Nectarinia batesi*) a presque certainement été entendue mais une observation visuelle nous semble nécessaire pour confirmer sa présence. Nous apportons aussi des indications sur la saison de reproduction et soulignons l'importance de la forêt pour la conservation de certaines espèces menacées, notamment La Pintade à poitrine blanche *Agelastes meleagrides* (localement commune), la Chouette-pêcheuse rousse *Scotopelia ussheri* (apparemment assez répandue), et le Malimbe de Gola *Malimbus ballmanni* redécouvert dans une partie de Gola Nord en 2007, plus de 30 ans après sa découverte.

Summary. Based on five weeks of field work in January–February 2007 observations on status, voice and behaviour are presented for some 50 selected species of Gola Forest, Sierra Leone, including those un- or under-recorded by Allport *et al.* (1989). Three are new or confirmed for the country: Black-collared Lovebird *Agapornis swindernianus*, Blue-headed Coucal *Centropus monachus* and Bates's Swift *Apus batesi*, whilst a fourth, Bates's Sunbird *Nectarinia batesi*, has almost certainly been heard but visual confirmation is required. The highlight was the rediscovery of Gola Malimbe *Malimbus ballmanni* in a section of Gola North, more than 30 years after it was first found. We underline the importance of the forest for the conservation of several threatened species. Full details, including breeding and moult records, are available from the authors.

Gola Forest is the largest remnant of evergreen rain forest in Sierra Leone, and is close to the western limit of this forest type in West Africa. It covers some 750 km², in two main blocks: Gola West/East (separated by the main Kenema road) in the south, and Gola North to the north-east (Fig. 1). The altitude is *c.*100–250 m, with some hills reaching 350 m or a little higher. The largest river is the Mahoi, in the south, while Mogbai stream is the most important watercourse draining Gola North. They both flow into the Moro (Mano) River on the border with Liberia. There is a single rainy season, from May to November. Annual rainfall in Gola Forest is probably *c.*3,000 mm.

The bulk of our knowledge of the avifauna of Gola Forest comes from Allport *et al.* (1989), who spent nearly five months in the forest and its envi-

rons, from 8 October 1988 to 26 February 1989. They recorded most of the Upper Guinea endemics; the highlight of their work was the discovery of Nimba Flycatcher *Melaenornis annamarulae*, new for Sierra Leone (and then only recently described, from Liberia by Forbes-Watson 1970). On the other hand they did not find any Gola Malimbe *Malimbus ballmanni*, an equally rare species discovered in 1971 by G. Field (Field 1979), just prior to it being described from western Côte d'Ivoire (Wolters 1974).

We visited Gola Forest from 22 January to 28 February 2007, spending 32 full days in the forest reserve. We divided our time between Gola East and the margins of adjacent Gola West (15 days), and Gola North (19 days, including two around Lalehun village outside the reserve). Localities visited are shown in Fig. 1. Most of our observations

were opportunistic, such as systematic investigation of bird parties. A small amount of mist-netting was undertaken at five locations. We did not visit Tiwai Island to the west, which is not strictly speaking part of Gola Forest Reserve.

Floristically, the forest is dominated by Leguminosae (Caesalpiniaceae, Mimosaceae) and falls entirely within the evergreen rain forest belt. The tree *Heritiera utilis* (Sterculiaceae) is also endemic to this belt; it is very common and has been much exploited in the past. Selective logging took place in the 1970s and 1980s, with some also in 2000–02, near Sileti and Lalehun. In the hills above Belebu there was only limited logging by villagers, but many trees were felled by hurricanes. Thus the forest canopy around Belebu and on some other hilltops is largely open, with huge clearings invaded by secondary tangles. Near Sileti

and the Mahoi bridge logged forest is recovering fast, but the 'canopy' can be as low as 10–15 m in places, with scattered large trees, and the understorey is very dense. A substantial section of Gola North was never logged (e.g. between Pandebu junction and Konella), but even there the structure of the forest is not what one would expect of primary forest. There are some tracts of tall, closed-canopy forest (25–30 m), with taller emergents, but also some large areas with a lower canopy, or gaps not easily explained by treefalls. There is some evidence that small sections of this forest were cultivated in the early 19th century (Unwin 1909). The forest is bordered locally by a few freshwater marshes in valley bottoms.

We recorded 236 species in Gola (21 strictly speaking outside the reserve, as in secondary forest at Lalehun). Of these we present information on



Figure 1. Map of Gola Forest. Gola West is separated from Gola East by the road (dashed line). Localities visited: 1 = Ngonkelekei Hill; 2 = Lalehun DFO (old site of district forest office); 3 = Pandebu junction; 4 = Konella; 5 = Sileti camp; 6 = Mahoi bridge; 7 = Tunkia Nema.

Carte de la Forêt de Gola. 'Gola West' est séparé de 'Gola East' par la route (ligne hachurée). Localités visitées : 1 = Ngonkelekei Hill ; 2 = Lalehun DFO (ancien site du bureau forestier du district) ; 3 = Pandebu junction ; 4 = Konella ; 5 = camp de Sileti ; 6 = pont sur la rivière Mahoi ; 7 = Tunkia Nema.

c.50 species, including those un- or under-recorded by Allport *et al.* (1989), but also describe little-known vocalisations or behaviour. Three species appear to be new or confirmed for the avifauna of Sierra Leone (Dowsett 1993). Our report (with a full annotated species list: Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2007b) can be obtained from us in the form of a PDF.

Notes on selected species

Hadada Ibis *Bostrychia hagedash*

The only ibis identified in Gola to date, with observations of singles or pairs on riverbanks in Gola East (three sites). Allport *et al.* (1989) noted four 'Ibis sp.' only once, without mentioning a locality. Although swamp forest is of limited extent in Gola, one might expect Spot-breasted Ibis *B. rara* to occur, but it has not yet been found in Sierra Leone (A. Siaka pers. comm.).

Congo Serpent Eagle *Dryotriorchis spectabilis*

Fairly vocal in January–February, when it sang mostly in the first two hours of morning, but also (the longer call, *cf.* Chappuis 2000) in late morning. Heard/seen on 15 of 32 days. At Sileti the local territorial bird was seen flying to different sections of its territory on each morning (to call); in more closed forest, this means the calling bird could be more easily missed. Other locations include Mahoi bridge, Tunkia Nema (forest edges), Belebu (forest edges), Pandebu junction (forest clearing) and Mogbai stream. Not reported by Allport *et al.* themselves, but noted by G. Field (*in* Allport *et al.* 1989: 81).

Ahanta Francolin *Francolinus ahantensis*

A marginal species of forest edges and second growth (Sileti, Belebu, Lalehun), calling mainly at night in January–February. Allport *et al.* (1989) noted only Double-spurred Francolin *F. bicalcaratus* in this habitat type (also present, especially in dry farmbush).

White-breasted Guineafowl *Agelastes meleagrides*

Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2004). Allport *et al.* (1989) met the species several times in Gola North and Gola East, mainly as small groups (2–5), the two largest numbering 12 and 14 birds (November and December). We came across two large groups in Gola North, the second (on 27 February) being attracted into view by a small

amount of playback: the birds were moving away but returned soon after we started playing a few seconds of calls, apparently looking for the 'intruders'. Some birds with bright red heads, unlike the pink heads of other birds present, fought between themselves, in 'pairs'. They flew up vertically and kicked each other like cocks. They did this a few times, then calmed down, and the whole group (c.20, all adults) walked back in the direction they came from. One may suppose that birds with red heads were males, based on their aggressive behaviour. Sexual dimorphism in head colour is not mentioned in the literature: Urban *et al.* (1986) write that sexes are alike, and more recent studies (including a detailed survey in Côte d'Ivoire: Francis *et al.* 1992) have apparently not observed this interesting feature.

Crested Guineafowl *Guttera pucherani*

Seen, heard or feathers found in four locations (Sileti and in Gola North). Unreported by Allport *et al.* (1989).

Black-collared Lovebird *Agapornis swindernianus*

The characteristic rolled calls of this species were heard over the canopy of primary forest near Konella on 26 February. This confirms the identity of 'Lovebirds sp.' seen by Allport *et al.* (1989) in the same area of primary forest and elsewhere ('One seen flying over Mogbai, two and three over logged forest...'). As the Red-headed Lovebird *A. pullarius* is never found in rain forest, there is little doubt that these lovebirds were in fact all Black-collared. New for Sierra Leone, and the



Black-collared Lovebird / Inséparable à collier noir
Agapornis swindernianus (Claudia Donati)

westernmost record—previously reported west to Grebo, Liberia (07°40'W; Demey 2007).

A. swindernianus is inexplicably rare in Liberia, where Gatter (1997) mentions the total absence of records in the 20th century, though it was collected frequently in the 19th century. This discreet forest species could have been overlooked. In Congo-Brazzaville and Cameroon we saw it mainly in pairs, trios, exceptionally small groups; knowledge of its voice is essential, as most records are of birds flying over the forest canopy—they may cover a large home range.

Blue-headed Coucal *Centropus monachus*

On 21 January, right in the centre of Kenema town, our attention was attracted by the slow, deep singing duet of a pair: they were perched in full view in a small patch of marsh and cultivation next to a rubbish pit. The darker back and inner wings, contrasting with rufous primaries, were clearly visible. On 7 February we saw one flying across a large marsh between Gola East and Kenema. Although new for Sierra Leone, this coucal is likely to be widespread in the country, especially in natural marshes. It may have been confused with Senegal Coucal *C. senegalensis* in the past. The song phrases are usually slower and deeper, although there is some overlap in tempo. The species is known from Liberia (Gatter 1997) solely on the basis of sound records. It would be desirable to confirm these with sight records, although this coucal should not be rare in marshes, moist farmbrush or in wet grass at the edge of wetlands.

Rufous Fishing Owl *Scotopelia ussheri*

Endangered (BirdLife International 2004). FD-L saw one at dusk at close range (12 m) perched on the edge of the Kwadi stream in Gola East on 4 February. Two days later we saw one again in the vicinity of that stream, 500 m from the first sighting. The habitat consists of a permanent but fairly shallow stream, 5–10 m wide, with some rocks and small sandy beaches. Although most of the stream is in the deep shade of large trees, it is close to the reserve's boundary and the village of Tunkia Nema. We found traces of this owl on the Mogbai stream near Konella, with faecal deposits on a rock next to a belly feather (later confirmed to belong to this species: M. Adams, Natural History Museum, Tring, *in litt.* 2007). Feathers of an owl

captured and eaten in a village near Sileti in January (exact origin unknown) were also identified as belonging to Rufous Fishing Owl. The species is probably widespread on the small streams of Gola Forest.

The only noise made by the owls we saw was some low grunts, probably in alarm (e.g. given when disturbed by torch light). In four nights spent on the Kwadi, we heard nothing that could be ascribed to a song. Its closest relative, the Vermiculated Fishing Owl *S. bouvieri*, has a complex duet of rhythmical hooting notes, and the larger Pel's Fishing Owl *S. peli* also sings in a duet. Therefore, the single, deep, well-spaced notes taped from a captive bird (Chappuis 2000) are unlikely to represent the song, which is as yet undescribed.

The first documented record for Gola was a captive juvenile (February 1989) from very disturbed second growth in a cocoa/coffee plantation, on a stream at the edge of Gola North (Allport *et al.* 1989). Although Klop (2006) has suggested the owl photographed in 1989 was in fact a Pel's Fishing Owl, the barring on the wings is shared by adults of both species, and the size of the bird points strongly to its being Rufous.

Pel's Fishing Owl *Scotopelia peli*

In Central Africa, e.g. in Congo-Brazzaville, we have noted this owl in the forest region mainly on larger rivers. In Gola, this remains to be confirmed, but one pair was heard duetting at Konella by A. Siaka (February 2007) on the Mogbai stream, at the edge of an artificial clearing in the forest. In this area the wide stream is exposed on one side by a total lack of trees (several ha having been cleared for cultivation during the civil war). This was less than 1 km from the site where we collected a feather of *S. ussheri*.

Red-chested Owlet *Glaucidium tephronotum*

Only one record in Allport *et al.* (1989), but we found it widespread in the canopy of secondary and primary forest: heard at five localities in Gola East and North, on 17 nights in all.

Brown Nightjar *Veles binotatus*

First identified in Gola in 2006 (Lindsell *et al.* 2008), and indeed found to be quite widespread in 2007 (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2008).

African Black Swift *Apus barbatus*

Large black swifts seen in January (when silent) were tentatively taken to be the European species *A. apus*, but all large swifts heard calling later were unquestionably African *A. barbatus* (which has a distinctive, prolonged rolled scream, or buzzing trill, cf. Chappuis 2000). Large numbers (up to 100 or more) were seen flying around clouds of midges over the edge of forest at Belebu (10, 12 and 14 February) and dozens (often calling) in the region of Lalehun (14–16 February), with fewer in the second half of the month (Konella, Lalehun). The species is known or suspected to breed in rock cracks in some highlands of northern Liberia, including the Nimba range and its extension in neighbouring countries (Gatter 1993, 1997). Gatter (1993) also reported a flock of c.20 on 17 March 1984 in eastern Sierra Leone (between Sefadu and the Loma Mountains). The only specimen of this West African population comes from Rokupr (09°01'N) near the Sierra Leone coast, collected on 28 September 1937: initially misidentified as an *A. apus*, it clearly is *A. barbatus* (Benson 1967).

This species was not identified by Allport *et al.* (1989) who instead mention other migrant species, *A. apus*, Pallid Swift *A. pallidus* and Mottled Swift *A. aequatorialis*, the last in (sometimes) 'large numbers'. These records are not dated, but European *A. apus* should be recorded mainly on passage, as the bulk of the population winters in southern Africa. Interestingly, G. Field (*in* Gatter 1993) had unpublished observations of large flocks of swifts including Mottled and dark *A. apus/barbatus* in western Sierra Leone from Freetown northwards, particularly in May–June. He suggested these swifts were *A. barbatus*.

Bates's Swift *Apus batesi*

A small forest swift, differing from all migratory black swifts mentioned above by its smaller size and long, deeply forked tail. Identified near Sileti (small flocks of up to ten), Mahoi bridge and Belebu, on eight occasions. Not reported by Allport *et al.* (1989), this forest species was also located by J. Lindsell (pers. comm.) on 17 November 2006 over Belebu. Included with a query in the checklist of Sierra Leone by Dowsett (1993), as the only indication of its presence was an unpublished mention by G. Field (*in litt.* 1989). The species is unknown west of Gola.

White-bellied Kingfisher *Alcedo leucogaster*

The song of this widespread forest species is hitherto undescribed and not yet tape-recorded. At Pandebu junction, one sang for a few minutes on three successive mornings from an arched branch near a small stream: the song consisted of four notes and was repeated at intervals. The first note was a drawn-out whistle, followed by three short ones (*psee, tsi-tsi-tsu*), the whole lasting just under one second. This simple song is shorter (with fewer notes) than that of Dwarf Kingfisher *Ceyx lecontei*, which at times was seen and heard very close to White-bellied. The song of Dwarf Kingfisher (which we have heard at several locations, from Congo-Brazzaville and Cameroon to Sierra Leone) is a 'dancing' jingle of high-pitched notes, more reminiscent of that of Pygmy Kingfisher *C. pictus*.

Yellow-casqued Hornbill *Ceratogymna elata*

Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2004). The commonest frugivorous hornbill throughout. Seen feeding on figs (*Ficus lutea*, *F. macrocarpa*) and fruit of palms (*Raphia*, *Laccosperma*), also small fleshy fruit of various lianas (e.g. Apocynaceae, *Dichapetalum*). Its diet is similar to that of Black-casqued Hornbill *C. atrata* in Central Africa, including its special liking for palm fruits (pers. obs.; Brosset & Erard 1986). In Gola *C. atrata* is greatly outnumbered by *C. elata*.

Yellow-spotted Barbet *Buccanodon duchaillui*

The song comprises a series of 8–10 accelerating *poo-poo-poo...* notes, which was published by Chappuis (1981, 2000) under the wrong species, Naked-faced Barbet *Gymnobucco calvus* (see also Borrow & Demey 2001). This is presumably what confused Allport *et al.* (1989): 'confusion over the call of this species [*G. calvus*] means that its status in other forest types [than very secondary] remains uncertain'. One of the most numerous and vocal species in secondary and primary forest. Hundreds of songs heard on most days; a frequent member of mixed-species flocks, feeding at mid levels.

Yellow-footed Honeyguide *Melignomon eisentrauti*

Data Deficient (BirdLife International 2004). Allport *et al.*'s (1989) observation of one in Gola East (February 1989) was the first for the country. One reason why this species might be more easily

overlooked than other honeyguides is that birds sing for a shorter time, in the early afternoon (for details on the singing habits of this species: see Dowsett-Lemaire 2008). In five weeks in Gola, we located two song posts of Yellow-footed (one in Gola East, the other in Gola North) against two of Willcocks's *Indicator willcocksii*, three of Thick-billed (Lesser) *I. (minor) conirostris* and four of Spotted *I. maculatus*.

Preuss's Cliff Swallow *Hirundo preussi*

Small numbers noted from 24 January to 24 February in several locations. This fits with the recent range extension southwards documented for Sierra Leone by Lindsell *et al.* (2007).

Western Wattled Cuckooshrike *Lobotos lobatus*

Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2004). Only one observation, a male feeding quietly in a medium-sized tree, on 10 February, atop Ngbonkelekei Hill near Belebu. The habitat was tall forest opened up by hurricanes, with many fallen large trees. Visibility in the hills above Belebu was extremely reduced, due to the overgrown understorey, and the species could be more common. Allport *et al.* (1989) located two pairs in Gola North, one of which was nesting (feeding two nestlings, 4–7 January). G. Field (*in* Allport *et al.* 1989) saw the species on 20 occasions on 62 days in the forest in 1971–76. The reduced number of records subsequently could simply result from the lack of good access roads and especially of good visibility along paths, as logging roads available to Field have since become overgrown. The species moreover appears to be largely silent.

Baumann's Greenbul *Phyllastrephus baumannii*

Data Deficient (BirdLife International 2004). Not a forest species in the evergreen rain forest zone, where this bulbul is principally restricted to low second growth, mainly where it is no more than 2–4 m tall (Dowsett-Lemaire *et al.* *in prep.*). One record by Allport *et al.* (1989) from primary forest was considered doubtful (Fishpool 2000). We found a few just outside Gola West (near Sileti) in a vast area of *Chromolaena* and *Harungana* regrowth in abandoned fields, and in similar habitat at Tunkia Nema in Gola East. Two were involved in a territorial dispute and snatches of song were tape-recorded.

White-throated Greenbul *Phyllastrephus albigularis*

An understorey species keeping generally lower than its congener Icterine Greenbul *P. icterinus*, and quite common in secondary forest at Gola East (recorded daily). The full song is given rather rarely and the species is more often detected by its contact calls (a low soft *trrr-trrr*, *trrr-trrr*), which can be heard at any time of day. More local in Gola North (recorded on 8/17 days), mainly in secondary forest, e.g., near Lalehun DFO (where common), and locally in primary forest where the understorey is disturbed by treefalls etc. Under-recorded by Allport *et al.* (1989) who saw it only twice, but there was formerly much confusion over the voice of *Phyllastrephus* bulbuls, as Chappuis's (1975) recordings included some errors, all corrected in Chappuis (2000).

Green-tailed Bristlebill *Bleda eximius*

Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2004). Unlike its two congeners (Grey-headed Bristlebill *B. canicapillus* and Red-tailed Bristlebill *B. syndactylus*, both very vocal) this species appears to sing or call only irregularly, which may lead to its numbers being under-estimated. Thus the song was heard only once (in four days) in the Tunkia Nema area and once (in seven days) in the Sileti area, yet mist-netting revealed the species to be present in small numbers. One male trapped and colour-ringed near Konella sang persistently for two days after capture, then went silent for the next few days. The species was easily mist-netted (eight of 23 *Bleda* caught were this species) and was certainly more common than records based on vocalisations would have suggested. Silent individuals were also seen in a few mixed-species flocks.

Chattering Cisticola *Cisticola anonymus*

Lindsell (2007) has recently clarified the status of this cisticola in Sierra Leone, its population being isolated from that in Central Africa by c.1,500 km. The habitat near Gola consists of rank growth amidst rice fields (Lindsell 2007) and also natural freshwater swamp as near Sileti (A. Siaka & A. Hester *pers. comm.*). The rice fields were indeed established in natural swamps, which are found commonly in valley bottoms throughout the country. These freshwater swamps, invaded with sedges, grasses, an Araceae (*Cyrtosperma sene-*

galense) and ferns (*Thelypteris confluens*) are very similar to the natural habitat of Chattering Cisticola in Central Africa (pers. obs. in Congo-Brazzaville and Cameroon): here the species is common in freshwater as well as in saline forest swamps (with the sedge *Rhynchospora corymbosa* dominant). It has also widely adapted to moist farmland throughout the region.

On 27 January we visited the marsh near Sileti where Chattering Cisticola was present in September 2006 (A. Siaka) and November 2005 (A. Hester pers. comm.), but the vegetation was bone-dry, and the birds apparently absent. However, two pairs were found in low forest regrowth in Konella clearing on 22–27 February, feeding in *Chromolaena odorata* (where they were picking aphids). They may have originated from a nearby swamp. It is curious that freshwater swamps of the kind present in Sierra Leone are not found today in Ghana (pers. obs.), nor apparently in adjacent countries, and this could explain the present wide gap in the distribution of Chattering Cisticola. The bird might, however, be expected to occur in Liberia, as swamps and lagoons are apparently common there (Gatter 1997).

Black-capped Apalis *Apalis nigriceps*

Hitherto unrecorded in Gola, a pair was found singing in a large *Piptadeniastrum* on a hill above Belebu (Popoda), on 11 February. It responded to playback of songs recorded in Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire (Chappuis 2000). It is otherwise known in Sierra Leone only from the Tingi Hills (Walker 1939) and Loma Mountains (Okoni-Williams *et al.* 2001). Similarly, in Liberia it is recorded mainly from forest above 500 m (up to 1,500 m), in the north of the country (Gatter 1997), although there are some recent records from lowland forest in the east (Demey 2007). In Central Africa this canopy apalis is also partial to hills and plateaux (e.g. Brosset & Erard 1986, Dowsett-Lemaire 1997). It could be more widespread in the hills in the north of Gola Forest.

Lead-coloured and Grey-throated Flycatchers

Myioparus plumbeus and *M. griseigularis*
Allport *et al.* (1989) had no record of the former, and only three of the latter. The former was never found to penetrate forest, but was only encountered at edges (at Belebu, Konella clearing) and in highly disturbed forest near Lalehun village. *M.*

griseigularis is common in low tangles in tall secondary forest, and more local in primary forest where this habitat is less frequent (in all we recorded it on 15 of 32 days): in January–February this species sang persistently in the early morning and in understorey parties (a song of 4–5 trembled whistles, typical of the genus). The alarm-call is a distinctive, soft *tutulee*, ...*tutulee* (third note higher). There are dialectal variations between the songs of Grey-throated in West and Central Africa: although motifs from West Africa are not specifically presented by Chappuis (2000), the second cut of Lead-coloured (from Côte d'Ivoire) is in fact a song of Grey-throated, as already remarked by R. Demey in Lachenaud (2006).

Shrike-Flycatcher *Megabyas flammulatus*

The usual song in Gola is a rising, sibilant trill, lasting <1 second. Up to 6–10 birds or pairs were encountered daily in Gola North, based on song and direct observations of canopy parties. The common occurrence of this species in 'primary' forest is surprising, as in most of its range this flycatcher is more characteristic of semi-evergreen forest with a broken canopy, and is usually common only in drier forest types (as in eastern Ghana, *cf.* Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2007a). But this comment does not apply just to this species: several other birds were found commonly in Gola North that are also more characteristic of secondary forest. These include Tambourine Dove *Turtur tympanistria*, Blue-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon malimbica* and Gabon Woodpecker *Dendropicos gabonensis*. This may mean that, despite the absence of commercial logging, the forest in Gola North has not fully recovered from some localised exploitation or cultivation that occurred in the distant past.

Fernando Po (Bioko) Batis *Batis poensis*

Unrecorded by Allport *et al.* (1989) themselves, but listed by G. Field (p. 81). We found it at two places: edge of forest (road) at Sileti, and several pairs in secondary forest at Lalehun DFO. Located by its high-pitched staccato song *tsi-tsi-tsi-tsi*. Rare in the evergreen forest zone, where recorded mainly in secondary situations, this batis is commoner in the open canopy of semi-evergreen or upland rain forest (pers. obs. from Ghana to Congo-Brazzaville).

Illadopsis *Illadopsis* spp.

We commonly encountered four species: Brown *I. fulvescens*, Pale-breasted *I. rufipennis*, Blackcap *I. cleaveri* and Rufous-winged *I. rufescens*—the first especially in secondary situations and logged forest, the last in more developed secondary and especially primary forest. We did not come across any Puvél's *Illadopsis I. puvéli*, but N. Borrow (pers. comm.) found several in February 2008 in farmbrush or low second growth, outside forest south of Sileti. Allport *et al.* (1989) had one record from farmbrush and another from second growth in Gola North.

Tit-Hylia *Pholidornis rushiæ*

At Sileti a pair was feeding two fledged young on aphids (collected in the foliage of *Chromolaena odorata*) on 26–28 January, whilst another pair was building a nest on a *Bridelia* branch arching 6 m above the road. The nest, a large ball, was constructed entirely of fluff taken from the open pods of a nearby *Funtumia africana*; the opening was on the lower side (facing down). Similar nests, entirely of *Funtumia* or 'rubber-seed' down, have already been described from Ghana by F. C. Holman (*in* Bannerman 1949) and from Nigeria by Foulkes-Roberts (cited by Chapin 1954). This information is given by Fry *et al.* (2000) as referring to *Funtumia elastica*, although neither original source gave the specific name (the two *Funtumia* species have similar downy seeds).

Brown Sunbird *Anthreptes gabonicus*

A discreet sunbird of thickets bordering large streams or rivers, observed on the Mahoi River on 30–31 January (FD-L). One or two were feeding in low trees (especially *Myrianthus libericus*) on sandy beaches in the riverbed. No previous records by Allport *et al.* (1989), nor G. Field, but seen in the same area in recent years by local researchers (E. Klop *in litt.* 2007).

? Bates's Sunbird *Nectarinia (Cinnyris) batesi*

A distinctive song was heard in the early morning, in forest canopy near Tunkia Nema, Gola East, on 4–5 February (FD-L). At least two different individuals were involved, separated by c.100 m. The song consisted of a series of 6–9 clear, detached, accentuated high whistles. It almost certainly belonged to Bates's Sunbird (*cf.* a recording of the song by Stjernstedt 1996, from Mwinilunga in

Zambia). Given that this species is still unknown from Sierra Leone, we feel that a good visual record is essential to confirm this. Barely known from Liberia (Gatter 1997 mentions a specimen taken in the east) where it could also have been overlooked, its presence in Gola would represent a considerable westward range extension. We were not previously familiar with the song of Bates's Sunbird, but with that of other small canopy sunbirds (such as Green (Yellow-chinned) Sunbird *Anthreptes rectirostris* and Tiny Sunbird *Nectarinia (Cinnyris) minulla*), which are very different.

Tiny Sunbird *Nectarinia (Cinnyris) minulla*

Only one record by Allport *et al.* (1989), from a cocoa plantation. A sibling of Olive-bellied Sunbird *N. chloropygia* of second growth, this species occurs in better-developed secondary forest, or around large gaps in primary forest. Of four separate records in Gola East and North, one was of a male singing in the open canopy on a hill above Konella: the song, weak but musical, is a useful identification tool.

Western Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus brachyrhynchus*

The repertoire of this widespread and common forest species includes several song types, some so fluid as to be easily confused with those of Black-winged Oriole *O. nigripennis*. The latter was, however, found only in highly degraded forest (such as near Lalehun). More surprisingly, one of the songs of *O. brachyrhynchus* in Gola was a simple *fuuh*, repeated, and very similar to the song of Many-coloured Bushshrike *Malaconotus multicolor* (present in Gola, especially primary forest in Gola North). Elsewhere in west-central Africa (at least from Ghana to Cameroon), it is *O. nigripennis* that includes the *fuuh* song type in its repertoire, and it can be heard after two minutes and 18 seconds in Chappuis (2000) under *O. nigripennis*: in this species, at least, the *fuuh* is usually preceded by a weaker *tchik* note (as *tchik-te-fuuh*), absent from the shrike's song. Playback of the song of *M. multicolor* often attracts the orioles into view: in Ghana *O. nigripennis* (pers. obs.), and here *O. brachyrhynchus*!

Lagden's Bushshrike *Malaconotus lagdeni*

Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2004). We found it in the same area of primary forest as

Allport *et al.* (1989), between the Mogbai stream at Konella and Pandebu junction. At least three territories located. Singing may be at best sporadic: songs were heard once in a mixed-species flock (in mid afternoon), and also between two birds answering each other. One bird near our camp at Konella sang only twice (in five days). The repertoire of this species is somewhat variable geographically: in the easternmost population, in the Albertine Rift, song types are identical to those of Grey-headed Bushshrike *M. blanchoti*, including the broken whistle (Dowsett-Lemaire 1990, with sonograms, from a tape partly published by Chappuis 2000). In eastern Ghana, these shrikes give a series of 4–5 identical soft whistles at the rate of one per second, with each whistle slightly rising in pitch (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2007a). In Gola the repertoire is more complex: one motif was a prolonged whistle preceded by a short, higher one (*fi, fûûûû*, second whistle 2.5 tones lower), as in a tape from Côte d'Ivoire (cuts one and two, Chappuis 2000); another was a series of soft, monotonous whistles *foo-foo-foo-* (also in Chappuis 2000, and fairly similar to that in Ghana, but notes not rising), and another produced the long whistles, including the broken whistles typical of *M. blanchoti*. The more modulated, oriole-type whistles tape-recorded in Côte d'Ivoire (in Chappuis 2000) were not heard here or in Ghana. It is curious that the *blanchoti*-type songs are heard in both the easternmost and westernmost populations of this species. However, A. Hester (pers. comm. 2008) thought he heard Lagden's in forest in central Ghana singing exactly like *M. blanchoti* (the bird was not seen for confirmation). This species readily reacts to playback, and to human imitation of its whistles: the initial reaction is for the bird to fall silent (if already singing) for several minutes, searching and giving some rattle calls; singing is usually resumed after 10–15 minutes (pers. obs. in Gola and in eastern Ghana).

Fiery-breasted Bushshrike *M. cruentus* also occurs in the Gola region, but is apparently restricted to secondary forest (e.g. Lalehun) and may not come into contact with Lagden's.

Shining Drongo *Dicrurus atripennis*

This common, noisy drongo occasionally mimics other species in its song. Birds in mixed flocks were seen producing the alarm-call of Green-tailed Bristlebill (a motif also imitated in Ghana); early

morning songs included clear notes of Brown Nightjar in two places, the drongo giving 2–3 notes of the nightjar before switching to another motif. It was also heard imitating the single notes (or start of the song) of Levaillant's Cuckoo *Clamator levaillantii*. This may seem surprising as the cuckoo does not breed in the forest region; birds spending the off-season in forest, however, occasionally give the full song or the single notes (pers. obs.). In Ghana, this drongo has also been heard imitating songs of Forest Wood-hoopoe *Phoeniculus castaneiceps* and Red-billed Helmetshrike *Prionops caniceps* (pers. obs.).

Maxwell's Black Weaver *Ploceus albinucha*

A species of the canopy or subcanopy, being particularly common in primary forest. Some groups were nest building and displaying in the canopy of large trees (one *Parinari excelsa*, one *Lophira alata*). In a third location (between Konella and Manyengema) birds were attending nests situated in a large *Terminalia superba* immediately below a nest of Crowned Eagle *Stephanoaetus coronatus*, with over 20 nests hanging in a large mass attached to a tree fork. Some birds were displaying, others entering nests and sitting (23 February). The grouping of nests in or close to a large raptor's nest had apparently not been documented in this species (Fry *et al.* 2004), but is known in some savanna weavers. In a marshy clearing near Sileti, a mixed colony of nests of Village *P. cucullatus* and Vieillot's Black Weavers *P. nigerrimus* was established in the fronds of an *Elaeis* palm, which in its centre had an occupied nest of an African Harrier Hawk *Polyboroides typus*, normally a predator of weavers' eggs or chicks!

Gola Malimbe *Malimbus ballmanni*

Endangered (BirdLife International 2004). Not reported for some 30 years, the species was relocated in primary, unlogged forest between Pandebu junction and Konella (Gola North). This was probably no more than a few km from where G. Field first found it. Although Field (1979) did not detail where he observed the species in 1971–76, in Allport *et al.* (1989: 61) he gave the location as some 9 km east of Lalehun, towards the end of a logging track. As this was through a plantation, he probably meant 9 km south-east, beyond the plantation at Lalehun DFO.

On 20 February three different pairs (the first with an independent immature) were located in three large mixed bird parties, between 09.40 and 14.00 hrs (FD-L and A. Siaka). The males of all three pairs were singing intermittently, a distinctive song of squeaky, discordant notes (on different pitches); the third male concluded its songs with a 'wheeze', something unique in West African malimbés. The song is well described in Gatter & Gardner (1993), as summarised in Borrow & Demey (2001). The only other malimbés with a wheeze are the Central African Rachel's Malimbe *M. racheliae* (a sibling species) and Red-crowned Malimbe *M. coronatus* (the latter has a longer wheeze).

The birds were feeding and moving unhurriedly in tangles of lianas and foliage of trees at mid levels (*c.* 15 m), under a fairly closed canopy, often with Blue-billed *M. nitens* or Crested Malimbés *M. malimbicus*. The immature was feeding independently or with the male: the yellow extended to the chin and the bill was pale yellow. It had no yellow on the crown or nape (as shown in the immature male in Borrow & Demey 2001), being presumably an immature female (Gatter & Gardner 1993). The first two parties were contiguous, the third was *c.* 1 km distant. When we recrossed the area on 23 and 27 February in mid morning, walking slowly, the forest was silent and the malimbés invisible. Otherwise a song of Gola Malimbe was heard briefly in a mixed flock on 26 February near Konella. A couple of very large mixed parties in forest with a more open canopy (including on a hill above Konella damaged by storms) contained no Gola Malimbés. Thus the species is probably restricted to primary, unlogged forest in Gola North.

Gola Malimbe was reported on a hill above Bebebu (November 2006) by I. Sinclair (*cf. Bull. ABC* 14: 102) but the occurrence of the species has not been confirmed by further searches there and the habitat appears unsuitable. Ryan's (2005) comment that Gola Malimbe has been recorded near Bebebu 'in the past' is incorrect, and his group (who, in Gola North, visited only the Bebebu area) did not find the species. Two other birders informed by us of the relocation of the malimbe east of Lalehun have found it again in the same area (D. Hoddinott in November 2007, N. Borrow in February 2008), and D. Hoddinott (*in litt.* 2007) observed a pair finishing a nest on 26 November.

Further prospection is needed to estimate the population of this rare malimbe, including in unlogged sections of Gola East. Gola is at the western limit of a small range reaching the western edge of Côte d'Ivoire (where the type specimen was collected in 1972: Wolters 1974). Extensive surveys in Tai National Park to the south of the collecting locality have failed to find it (Gartshore *et al.* 1995). Its closest relative is undoubtedly Rachel's Malimbe of Central Africa, which occupies a similar niche in primary, undisturbed forest from south-eastern Nigeria to Gabon (Brosset & Erard 1986; pers. obs.); they were treated as a superspecies by Dowsett & Forbes-Watson (1993), followed by Fry & Keith (2004). The nests of Gola Malimbe are similar in shape and position to those of Rachel's, suspended from a vine in the mid stratum (Gatter & Gardner 1993). It is threatened through most of its small range, as the forests in western Côte d'Ivoire and eastern Liberia are unprotected and shrinking (Gatter & Gardner 1993); Gola Forest has been separated from the blocks of eastern Liberia by extensive deforestation, and the primary forest remaining in Gola is not large. R. Demey (*in litt.* 2006), however, saw the species on the Liberian side of Gola in 2005. Although Gatter & Gardner (1993) mention that the species appears to survive in logged forest, this may nevertheless mean that birds can hang on for a few years where the forest has been logged, but then fail to breed in marginal conditions and eventually die out.

Red-fronted Antpecker *Parmoptila rubrifrons*

A discreet species of the understorey of primary and secondary forest, which we mist-netted and saw near the Mahoi River and at Pandebu junction. The song remains undescribed, but a soft, high-pitched estrildid song, heard on the edge of the Mahoi River and near the Mahoi bridge possibly belongs to this species: it could be transcribed as *tututi*, *tuwi*, trill, *tituuu*. The trill consists of five high clear notes and the whole song lasts *c.* 2 seconds. It was also heard in primary forest in Ghana, including at Atewa exactly where we mist-netted and saw the species (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2005). Unfortunately we have to date failed to observe the bird in song. The songs of other forest Estrildidae (including negrosfinches *Nigrita* spp.) are very different.

Pale-fronted Negrofinch *Nigrita luteifrons*

Seen once in secondary forest near Lalehun DFO (RJD), on 15 February. Unlike the vocal Grey-crowned Negrofinch *N. canicapilla*, this species almost never sings (e.g. its song, reproduced in Chappuis 2000, was heard only once in 13 months of field work in Odzala, Congo-Brazzaville, where it was common and breeding around the house: Dowsett-Lemaire 1997). The most characteristic call is a descending four-note whistle, but even this is not given frequently. Not reported by Allport *et al.* (1989), but listed by G. Field (p. 81).

Breeding seasonality

Nothing has been published on breeding seasons in Gola. Allport *et al.* (1989) included no information on breeding activity, and their moult data mentioned in the text were unfortunately omitted from their Appendix.

We obtained 66 breeding records for 42 species, details of which can be found in our report. The general impression from the present survey is that most birds started breeding at the end of the rains, in perhaps October, certainly by November–December, as some juveniles were already independent or still being fed but fully grown. But quite a few species were still egg laying (perhaps mainly repeat clutches) in January–February, and vocal activity overall was high. Species breeding in the dry season include Latham's Forest Francolin *Francolinus lathamii*, Blue-throated Roller *Eurystomus gularis*, several doves, hornbills, bulbuls, warblers, flycatchers, sunbirds, drongos and weavers/malimbés; from the amount of vocalising, raptors such as Congo Serpent Eagle must also be breeding. Turdidae had apparently finished (many independent juvenile Forest Robins *Stiphornis erythrothorax* and Fire-crested Alethes *Alethe diademata*), but as their main nest parasite the Red-chested Cuckoos *Cuculus solitarius* were singing, this may suggest that they were about to start again, with the early rains. Illadopses had largely finished: several groups of Pale-breasted Illadopsis had recently independent juveniles, five of seven Blackcap Illadopsis mist-netted were starting moult, only one pair of Rufous-winged Illadopsis had a dependent juvenile (others caught were sexually inactive and vocal output was reduced). Surprisingly Western Black-headed Orioles were

apparently inactive (although vocal) with only one or two independent juveniles seen. Mist-netting confirmed that most Turdidae were in fresh plumage, having completed moult, while some bulbuls were in post-breeding moult (and others still breeding).

Conservation importance of Gola Forest

Logging is no longer an issue in Gola, which may acquire the status of national park in the near future. Hunting has been less intensive than in many forests in West Africa, even during the civil war; as a result the forest hosts important populations of endangered monkeys (including Diana Monkey *Cercopithecus diana* and Western Red Colobus *Procolobus badius*), and large frugivorous hornbills are not threatened. Both the Near-Threatened Brown-cheeked Hornbill *Bycanistes cylindricus* and especially Yellow-casqued Hornbill occur in good numbers. The forest is particularly important for the survival of the Endangered White-breasted Guineafowl and Rufous Fishing Owl, which appear widespread, the guineafowl even locally common. Of the two Vulnerable bulbuls, Green-tailed Bristlebill and Yellow-bearded Greenbul *Criniger olivaceus*, the former occurs in higher numbers than its discreet habits may suggest, whilst the *Criniger* is common in primary forest in Gola North; it is clearly uncommon in logged forest in Gola East or elsewhere, but numbers may recover slowly as the forest is allowed to regenerate. More research is needed to assess the size of the population of two discreet species, Gola Malimbe (Endangered) and Western Wattled Cuckooshrike (Vulnerable), and also of Nimba Flycatcher (Vulnerable), not found during this survey.

Acknowledgements

We thank Jeremy Lindsell (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) and D. D. Siaffa (Conservation Society of Sierra Leone) for inviting us to undertake this survey. The RSPB met our expenses, and the CSSL and Gola Forest Conservation Programme provided logistical support in the country. Alhaji Siaka was a valued colleague in the office and (for part of the time) in the field, and for assistance and advice we are also grateful to Erik Klop and Alhassan Kemokai among others. We thank Nik Borrow and Ron Demey for useful comments.

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- Received 5 May 2008; revision accepted 28 May 2008.

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